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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical silence of women and how that is replicated in the schools. The work focuses on the narratives of 31 college-aged women as they reflect on the experiences of their middle school years. This qualitative analysis of recollected narratives of girlhood is based on listening to the powerful voices of young women in college, and traces, within a limited scope, their hesitant construction of themselves and their way of being in the world within the limited linguistic space allotted them. Silencing in the classroom is noted repeatedly in the narratives, as young women are afraid to speak out or are encouraged not to participate. Several of the women noted the centrality of appearances in their early adolescent years, along with the knowledge that being friends with the "right" people, as well as having a boyfriend, meant the difference between inclusion and exclusion. Several women noted being ashamed of their capabilities, of their inability to fully realize a sense of themselves within their linguistically dichotomized social world, or of their need to be perfect. A challenge is issued for primary institutions, especially schools, to break down the "patriarchal logic" designed to dichotomize language and to discredit girls. (EH)

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RECOLLECTIONS OF GIRLHOOD, RECONSTRUCTIONS OF SELF

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AERA, Spring 96

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AERA Spring 96

Recollections of Girlhood, Reconstructions of Self

The historical silence of women is now a well-documented fact. In the introduction to Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women, editors Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney say:

> Historically, woman's place is outside written discourse, excluded from the entitlement that acts of reading and writing confer. When women dare to break this silence and access the power of language, they often do so with profuse apologies and complicated strategies of indirection, substitution, and negation (p. xv).

As we have studied the historical silence of women in the sciences and in literature, and have witnessed and lived the contemporary silence of women today, we came to a place where we knew that we had to enter into the conversation of women's and girls' lives. This has forced us to become not only researchers, but activists, who, through engagement and discourse, continually ask ourselves, as does poet Adrienne Rich, "How do we make it possible for another to break her silence?" (p.185).

Young women's stories about voice and power are rich with metaphors of silence and of not knowing. Images of opaque lenses and of small spaces narrowly defined float into their writing. Murky discomfort frames and fills the remembered/dis-remembered lives of young women who write about their early adolescent experiences. Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of young women's stories is their lack of personal desire--that is, young women seem not to be able to authorize themselves to desire pleasure, knowledge, or personal capability--in short, they seem not to have the authority to desire anything for themselves at all. The language of their stories is suffused with this lack of desire, this distancing from what they seem to bodily know as real and true, and the lack of a space in which to articulate desire is, instead, a sort of adolescent female wasteland, muffled with phrases such as "I don't remember middle school at all," I just got quieter and quieter," "I was terrified of screwing up every single day," "I couldn't really explain why I felt so uncomfortable." Current scholarship establishes a

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pattern of the loss of voice in girlhood at the age of 10 or so for many girls, particularly white girls. Brown and Gilligan in Meeting at the Crossroads , and Peggy Orrenstein in Schoolgirls saw girls' stories change as they approached this "crossroads" from stories of voiced, active, authentic accounts of relationships, perceptions and experiences, to vague statements of "I don't know" reflecting the "shoulds and oughts" of prescribed coping in a patriarchal world. A world in which there is no language in which to articulate female desire. A world in which there is no language by which to position oneself, as a girl, within a storyline of personal power and authorized knowing. Our work focuses on the narratives of thirty-one college-aged women as they reflect on the experiences of their middle school years.

The question remains: when do girls (women) come out on the other side of silence to a space above ground where they can acknowledge their desires, explore their knowledge, reflect on their meanings? And if the self is constructed through the meanings allotted to us as afforded by the language that we have at our disposal, how then is a young woman to come to have any means by which to make sense of her self, her world, if she, as Dale Spender says, is labeled as "negative," as a "minus male, as "not 'the real thing'." That is, "because women have not been involved in the production of the legitimated language, they have been unable to give weight to their own symbolic meanings...they have been unable to pass on a tradition of women's meanings of the world" (as quoted in Spender, p. 52). This study, a qualitative analysis of recollected narratives of girlhood is based on listening to the powerful voices of young women in college, and traces, within its limited scope, their hesitant construction of themselves and their way of being in the world within the limited linguistic space allotted them.

One of the key arenas in which knowledge is tried on and tested out is the classroom. Unfortunately, according to researchers Myra and David Sadker in Failing at Fairness, and Peggy Orrenstein in Schoolgirls, the classroom is also a key arena in which women are silenced, and therefore is a place in which it is difficult for women to construct some sense of themselves, and their world. From our study, there is staggering amount of narrated evidence supporting this. For example:

> "Sheila" recollects: I remember being quiet. I don't know why, but I was always very quiet. In class, I spoke when spoken to. I remember one teacher in particular thought I was dumb--I mean not smart--because I was quiet. One day when I was not in class, she

> told the whole class I stayed home to have my mom finish a project that was due that day. When my friends told me of the speech...I was so angry. But I did nothing. When my mom found out from my friends, she talked to the principal. I can't remember what happened to the teacher, but I can remember feeling dumber and being quieter. I just wanted to hide, which probably made her think I was even dumber...So I just got quieter and quieter, hoping she would leave me alone.

"Jen" tells a story suffused with treachery within the context of the classroom:

> There was a young man who like me. He was one of the smarter boys in the class. I however did not like him as a boyfriend only as a fellow student. On a particular day, he hit me or did something out of line. I told my teacher--a male social studies teacher--he said to me, "Maybe you did something to provoke him." I shut down. I acted like I wasn't there. I just couldn't believe his neglecting to come to terms that "I" had done the wrong thing but turned and blamed me.

The question now arises: can or could the classroom be a safe space where voices are honored and nurtured, and buried, smothered voices are tried out again? Are there any or enough such spaces?

Many of the women in our study talked about the centrality of appearances in their early adolescent years, along with the knowledge that being friends with "the right people" as well as having a boyfriend meant the difference between inclusion and exclusion. These girls were leaning to construct themselves as marketable, as pleasing, as, above all, desirable, despite any fears or reservations to the contrary. Brown and Gilligan call this "the replacement of real with inauthentic or idealized relationships" (p. 6), one of the significant symbols of being at the "crossroads"--a position "marked by a series of disconnections or dissociations which leave girls psychologically at risk and involved in a relational struggle (ibid.).

"Suzanne" said: Suddenly I was getting all of this positive attention. It was probably in 7th grade that I lost a lot of weight, but in 8th grade, when I returned from summer vacation, everyone told me how great I looked. People thought I was someone else, or when they looked for me, they couldn't find me.

"Sally" said: I don't remember anything good from junior high school, only bad. I remember losing a good deal of weight in 8th grade to the point where it was unhealthy.

"Susan" said: I was constantly worrying about what other people thought of me, I worried very much about gaining the approval of m teachers and other adults. Mostly I was afraid that someone would catch on to the fact that I was faking my confidence.

She goes on to talk about the "in" crowd of boys in her classes in 7th and 8th grades: I had really mixed feelings about these guys. I knew that the way to become part of the popular crowd was to date one of these guys. I also knew that I was really afraid of them. One of the guys liked me and used to get all of his friends to yell my name as I walked by. I remember being terrified and proud at the same time.

"Cassandra" talked about a boy on whom she had a crush:

He sat behind me in music class--we ere learning to play recorders. The seats, the rows were tiered: the ones behind a little higher than the ones in front. Well, he sat behind me and higher. In fact, his crotch was about eye-level if I turned. So one day he was wearing cut-offs...when I turned I saw him looking at me, and then I saw his crotch. I though he had a boner...and he was looking at me! Well, imagine my surprise and delight! If he reacted this way from looking at me in music, think how he must really feel!

"Kathy" said: There isn't any specific story that comes to mind when I think of my middle school years. But what I do remember is not happy times.

Several of the women in our study talked about being ashamed of their capabilities, of their inability to fully realize a sense of themselves within their linguistically dichotomized social world, or of their need to be perfect.

"Susan" simply said, "I never ended up dating anyone in middle school. I also never became the social hub of popularity. I made honor roll. **I was terrified of screwing up *every single day*** (emphasis mine).

"Cindy" talked about being the recipient of several awards during middle school: The ceremony went on and I was horrified to find that I had won several awards. I was also horrified that they had ignored my request to only be called up to the front of the auditorium once. I had to get up in front of everybody what seemed like a thousand times. I was so embarrassed and horrified and angry. When I went to lunch that day, I walked into the cafeteria and this guy that I had known since 1st grade stood up in front of the whole cafeteria containing a couple hundred people and said something like 'Here comes that smart nerd girl. Get out of here. Nobody wants you here.' I burst into tears and fled the room. [Later] I threw the awards in a box and stuffed them in the back of my closet. To this day, they are still in that box, hidden away from everyone.

"Christy" said: I finally started getting good grades. I was known at this school as nerdish because of this as opposed to before when I was below average. I still felt somewhat isolated socially because I was getting good grades. I remember the boys making fun of me for being 'studious.' I was proud of myself . I aspired to become a doctor.

And then: I went to a science and math summer institute for gifted students the summer after my junior year. this experience shot down all my hopes of going into science because everyone there, especially the boys, were much quicker and smarter with the material. I felt and still feel today that I can't put effort into something unless I am the best or at least can get A's in what I am doing. I feel worthless and useless.

"Val" said: I was totally messed up in 8th grade. Things looked perfect on the outside, but inside things were really screwed up. I was a pretty good student although not good enough. I tried to kill myself. I took my army knife and made 32 slits in my wrist. I didn't dig deep enough which proved that I really didn't want to die. But torture. I really wanted to torture myself. I deserved it.

What does it say about the education system when girls are made to feel ashamed of their gifts? And who is to say if those gifts will ever be taken out from the box, hidden away from everyone, at the back of the closet. In what kind of system do we force ambitious young women to feel threatened and worthless in science and math? In what kind of society do we mold young women into marketable packages of desirability, so that the most important thing is to have a boy get "a boner" as he gazes upon her? In what name of education are "pretty good" students not good enough--not good enough to the pint where they want to kill themselves? In these stories, the voices of these women and the girls they once were come through loud and clear. They cry out for us to deconstruct the system wherein one is linguistically forced into a position of either/or--either 'smart' or 'popular,''perfect' or 'worthless.' We need to honor the voices of the young women who walk through the halls of our middle schools, our high schools, our colleges. Most of all, we have to provide a safe space in which young women can grapple with their sense of themselves and their world--only then might we come to a place where all of us, even those of us on the 'other' side of silence might then be able to begin to reconstruct our lives, our selves. This presents a clear challenge to what Carter Heyward calls "patriarchal logic"(p. 135)--that is, that primary institutions, especially schools, are designed to dichotomize language (and therefore, the world) and to discredit girls.

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